

Letter to THE from Prof Peter J Diggle, President of the Royal Statistical Society

The suggestion to rank institutions according to *QR funding per staff member submitted to REF* (in “Can you win by fielding the whole team?”, 7 May) is problematic, and not only because, as mentioned in the article, some research fields are much more expensive than others. Such a ranking is also distorted by institutional differences in staff selectivity: REF-excluded staff are awarded zero QR funding but are not counted.

An alternative, which would lead to rankings that are more informative and would also reduce the institutional tension between league-table position and QR funding, is to use a “quality per researcher” measure, in which every REF-eligible researcher is counted, and where the “quality” score is GPA-like but with the GPA weights 4:3:2:1:0 for REF quality levels replaced by the weights that determine QR funding. This is one of the conclusions reached recently by a working party set up by the Royal Statistical Society to consider how rankings based upon REF results could be improved, in particular to provide better public information on the relative standings of universities and of their departments.

The RSS working party's report also makes some related suggestions for the funding councils themselves, about REF submission rules and reporting; these include elimination of the distorting “threshold” effect of REF 2014's formula for the number of Impact Case Studies in each submission.

The working party's full report can be found at <http://www.rss.org.uk/ref>

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